



Formation at Tres Esquinas in coca-growing Amazonian lowlands.

AP/Wide World Photos (Ricardo Mazalan)

# Colombia

## Civil-Military Relations in the Midst of War

By JOHN T. FISHEL

Civil-military relations deal not only with who makes decisions about the use of force but what is decided. Any discussion of civil-military relations must address how the military relates to elements of civil society, including insurgents, narcotics traffickers and other criminals, paramilitary militias, and

nongovernmental organizations, especially those groups focused on human rights. In this context, assessing civil-military relations in Colombia requires appreciation of several factors: a longstanding democratic tradition, the evolution of the defense sector since the Cold War, and the efforts by the armed forces to stabilize civil-military relations in a war-torn society.

### **Praetorianism**

Unlike most countries of Latin America, Colombia has not been significantly involved with praetorian rule

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## Republica de Colombia

**Defense Budget:** Estimated at \$2 billion for 2000; the gross domestic product in 1999 was \$77 billion (\$5,800 per capita).

**Manpower:** With a population of 42,400,000, Colombia has a total of 5,195,000 men between 18 and 32 years of age. Active military strength is 153,000. Reserve forces number 60,700—army, 54,700; navy, 4,800; and air force, 1,200.

**Armed Forces:** Colombia has an army of 130,000 soldiers and 30 light tanks (in storage); a navy with 15,000 sailors (including coastguardsmen) and 4 submarines, 4 surface combatants, 27 patrol/coastal craft, a force of 8,500 marines, and naval aviation with 100 personnel; an air force with 8,000 members and 72 combat aircraft; and a national police force with 95,000 personnel.

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2000–2001* (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2000).

despite its tumultuous early history. The nation was wracked by civil wars between partisans of the Liberal and Conservative parties in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, generally without participation by its small professional army. On the one occasion in which the military took sides, the reaction almost led to its disappearance. Not until after the War of the Thousand Days (1899–1902) and the long peace that followed was a professional force firmly established.

During the period of peace from 1902 to 1948 the army was generally not considered to be a political instrument. Only under the presidency of Alfonso Lopez (1934–38) did significant civil-military conflict surface. A Liberal, Lopez was suspicious of the Conservative orientation of most of the officer corps. He began intervening in promotions, seeking officers sympathetic to his ideas on social reform. Nevertheless, as one author noted, "only one minor conspiracy to depose Lopez surfaced in the military (1936) . . . despite his repeated attacks on the armed forces."<sup>1</sup> Another more serious coup in 1944 attempted to overthrow Lopez during his second term but it also failed. No further coups were attempted until the civil



Colombian  
independence day,  
July 20.

AP/Wide World Photos (Ariana Cubillos)

war known as *La Violencia* effectively destroyed the elite political balance between Liberals and Conservatives in place since 1902.

*La Violencia* began as a street riot in Bogota (known as *Bogotazo*) that erupted in the wake of the assassination in 1948 of Liberal Party leader and presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan. Rural violence, which had begun as early as 1946, raged out of control in much of the nation after *Bogotazo*. From 1948 to 1950 military officers replaced Liberal cabinet officers who had left the coalition government as a result of *La Violencia*. They cooperated with the radical Conservative president in closing the Liberal-dominated congress and supported the uncontested election of 1950 that led to the Conservative dictatorship of President Laureano Gomez.

The violence, government-ordered repression, and divisions within the Conservative Party brought the army leadership, especially its popular commander, General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla,

into conflict with Gomez. The political crisis erupted in June 1953 when Gomez was ousted by Pinilla, who assumed the presidency with the backing of moderate elements within the Conservative Party. A century of military obedience to civilian authority ended.

By offering amnesty to any guerrilla who would disarm, the new president initially held out a real incentive to end the violence. He also pledged to conduct a nonpartisan administration,

which provided an added inducement to return to a peaceful society. Coupled with war weariness these steps resulted in reduced violence until 1956. Then the economy, which had been quite vigorous because of high coffee prices, took a downturn as the coffee market collapsed. By then it was also apparent that the general, aside from being partisan, was building a political organization in the manner of Juan Peron

of Argentina. Thus violence rose again and the public was increasingly disaffected by authoritarian rule. When the president tampered with the electoral process in 1957, a military junta deposed him. The junta, in turn, was succeeded by the National Front governing arrangement, which resulted in power sharing between the Liberals and Conservatives until 1974. Since that time there has been power alternation in generally free and fair elections. There has been no threat of a military coup since 1958. As a recent U.S. defense attaché observed, the military is apolitical.

*Its members avoid interfering in internal domestic politics to a degree not witnessed in many other Latin American countries. This is an admirable fact: I've served in some countries where the U.S. embassy was always on a "coup watch". . . Happily, that is not something I've had to watch closely in Colombia because the chances of a coup there are extremely remote.*<sup>2</sup>



### Civil-Military Relations

In spite of 52 years of civil war that began with *La Violencia*, the command, control, and organization of the Colombian armed forces have continuously evolved in a direction that supports the development of democratic civil-military relations.

One action of the Gomez government that led Pinilla to seize power was the politicization of the national police. This force was established during the presidency of Alfonso Lopez as a counterweight to the army but it took the conservative Gomez regime to make the police an agent of the party. One of the first acts of the Pinilla government was to move the national police from the Ministry of the Interior to the Ministry of Defense in an effort to depoliticize the force. The police remain under the latter ministry today, separate from the army but residing in the same ministry. But although depoliticization succeeded, the police have been militarized as a result of the insurgency and the fight against drugs. One civilian in the Ministry of Defense

has argued that they have become a second army.

While it may no longer be useful, integrating the police into the defense

### integrating the police into the defense establishment has not had a discernible impact on civil-military relations

establishment has not had a discernible impact on the dynamic of civil-military relations. That issue relates to the way the government has organized the Ministry of Defense internally and with respect to the other parts of the executive branch. Colombia adopted a single defense ministry earlier than many Latin American countries. Moreover, early in the administration of President Cesar Gaviria (1990–94) the first civilian in the country's history was named minister of defense. Since then every minister has been a civilian.

The minister serves in a chain of command that runs from the president, as commander in chief, through the defense minister to the armed forces commander. Indeed, this has been the case since the ministry was formed. Further, it is common today in 13 of the 18 countries in Latin America, an increase reflecting a trend toward rationalization of defense organization.

Despite the positive development of having a civilian minister in the chain, implementation has suffered from the high turnover of ministers. For example, in the first two years of the Andres Pastrana presidency there were two ministers of defense, continuing a trend begun under Gaviria and his successor, Ernesto Samper. Short tenure coupled with inexperience has led to inconsistent and ineffective defense policy. Another development was the designation of a civilian vice minister with responsibility for day-to-day technical functions such as budget and

Right wing para-  
military southwest  
of Bogota.



AP/Wide World Photos (Oswaldo Paz)

Firing mortar at  
suspected FARC  
stronghold.



AP/Wide World Photos (Oswaldo Paz)

finance, infrastructure, and acquisition. At present, the vice minister is not in the chain of command, although this subject is now being debated, suggesting that his future role will be carefully delineated.

Colombia is also moving toward greater jointness. A joint staff located within the Ministry of Defense is subordinate to the minister. Moreover, the several joint commands include not only two or more services, but also the national police. The latter are most involved in insurgency and narco-trafficking.

Since a civilian became defense minister, Colombia has developed a cadre of experienced civil servants to people the ministry. Some are former junior officers but most have never served in the military. Increasingly they are graduates of the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies at the National

Defense University in Washington, which gives them a common frame of reference with members of the armed forces and National Planning Office, an executive agency responsible for the national budget, a role similar to that

of the Office of Management and Budget in the United States, though far more powerful.

These developments in civil-military relations in the executive branch are among the most democratic in the region. Civilians occupy key positions within the chain of command and also within the ministry as well as the office that allocates the national budget. Moreover, civilians in these positions are increasingly educated in the core competencies of defense and national security. Despite a high turnover in defense ministers, Colombia demonstrates the principles of democratic civil-military relations.

### A Bloody Struggle

The current civil war, which began with *La Violencia* a half century ago, degenerated from a typical civil war between the two traditional parties

into political banditry, rebounding into a new political conflict with Marxist-Leninist guerrillas, then was transformed again into a conflict that is sometimes fought over politics and at others over narcotics.<sup>3</sup> The present struggle has raised new issues.

Earlier, Colombia's conscript/cadre army allowed high school graduates who were drafted to serve their military obligation in noncombat assignments. This exemption was regarded as right and proper when the nation was at peace. But when the insurgency and narco war heated up in the 1980s the draft inequity became more and more apparent until it threatened civil-military relations. Legislation to remove the combat exemption was expected to be implemented in September 2000.

Another major problem arises from the conduct of counterinsurgency operations and the relationship between the armed forces and paramilitary militias that are combating the insurgents. Colombia is a historically violent country that has known only relatively brief

### Colombia is a violent country that has known only brief periods of peace

periods of peace. Its civil wars have been exceptionally brutal, with each side committing atrocities. Thus it is hardly surprising that the current conflict is noted for its viciousness.

This conflict pits the state against two significant insurgent movements, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC)—and the National Liberation Army—*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN)—as well as several paramilitary militias and narco-traffickers (who are allied with insurgents and militias) depending on the locale. In addition, the narco-traffickers have sought to corrupt state agencies to conduct their nefarious business without hindrance.

In fighting on multiple fronts the armed forces—and to a lesser extent the police—have had considerable operational autonomy. As two observers have concluded, “while civilian authority is alluded to within national



Naval patrol boats on Putumayo River.

AP/Wide World Photos (Javier Galeano)

constitutions, it is not specified for each kind of military mission . . . legal provisions probably overstate the degree to which political leaders actually supervise military conduct.”<sup>4</sup> According to the Colombian Commission of Jurists security forces were responsible for 54 percent of political killings in 1993. This was reduced to 16 percent in 1995 and 18 percent in 1996. It declined still further to 7.5 percent in 1997 and 2.7 percent for the first nine months of 1998.<sup>5</sup> Two preliminary conclusions can be drawn. First, tightening government supervision of security forces is resulting in greater respect for human rights. Second, security forces have some way to go before they conform to the principles of civil-military relations in a fully positive manner.

But the problem is more complex because of the relationship between the armed forces and paramilitaries. The latter are clearly responsible for a large number of political killings. In a mirror image to security forces, the Colombian Commission of Jurists stated that responsibility for such killings on the part of paramilitaries rose from 18 percent in 1993 to 46 percent in 1995 and 1996, and then to 69 percent in 1997 and to 76 percent in the first nine months of 1998. For comparison purposes, political killings

attributed to insurgents in the same years ranged from 21 to 38 percent.

The exact relationship between the armed forces and paramilitaries is unclear. According to a study by Human Rights Watch, “Implicated in extra-judicial executions, disappearances, torture, and threats, Mobile Brigade Two is reported to be closely linked to paramilitary groups operating in northern and central Colombia.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, there is evidence that some charges of human rights violations by the armed forces and their collusion with paramilitaries is based upon accounts which are dated or completely manufactured, originally reported in the European media, and then recycled in Colombia and/or the United States. Moreover, some allegations have appeared several times. As has been noted:

*Some Colombian authorities, such as General Fernando Tapias, Commanding General of the Armed Forces, and General Rosso Jose Serrano, Director of the National Police, profess to see no difference between the paramilitaries and the guerrillas, regarding each as a threat to state authority. Others, such as some military commanders, take a live and let live attitude. Some regard the paramilitaries as allies in the war against the insurgents.<sup>7</sup>*

Nonetheless, the armed forces have made strides in implementing policies to promote democratic institutions, even in the midst of war. **JFQ**

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J. Mark Ruhl, *Colombia: Armed Forces and Society* (Syracuse: Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, Syracuse University, 1980), p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> William C. Spracher, "The Colombian Armed Forces and National Security," *Crisis? What Crisis? Security Issues in Colombia*, edited by James L. Zackrisson (Washington: National Defense University, 1999), pp. 66–67.

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation runs counter to the conventional wisdom which sees a break between the period 1948–57 and the birth of *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) in 1962. But it can be argued that the FARC leader, Manuel Marulanda (also known as Tiro Fijo), began his career as a Liberal guerrilla in 1948, was a Liberal bandit from about 1954 to 1962 when he joined FARC, and then rose to become its leader.

<sup>4</sup> David Pion-Berlin and Craig Arceneaux, "Decision-Makers or Decision-Takers? Military Missions and Civilian Control in Democratic South America," *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Spring 2000), p. 420.

<sup>5</sup> Gabriel Marcella and Donald Schulz, *Colombia's Three Wars: U.S. Strategy at the Crossroads* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Patricia Bibes, "Colombia: The Military and the Narco-Conflict," *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement* (forthcoming).

<sup>7</sup> Marcella and Schulz, *Colombia's Three Wars*, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> David Passage, *The United States and Colombia: Untying the Gordian Knot* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2000), p. 21.

Guerrilla skirmish,  
Mount Montezuma.



AP/Wide World Photos

The ambiguous if not ambivalent relationship between the armed forces and paramilitaries, coupled with alleged and actual human rights violations by security forces, makes the conduct of civil-military relations in Colombia problematic at best. The forces "need to fundamentally change the way they deal with their civilian population. They need to end—definitively—the human rights abuses which have marred their interaction with the civilian populace, remove the violators from military and civilian ranks, and prosecute in civilian courts those who should be charged with civil crimes and abuses."<sup>8</sup> According to interviews much of this is taking place. The armed forces are working closely with the United Nations to address human rights issues within the law of war while General Tapias is seeking better communication on the part of the military with human rights groups.

With respect to impunity, many cases are being heard in civilian courts, and privileges that once excluded military members from prosecution are becoming a thing of the past. Despite the fact that jurisdiction over human rights violations has been passed to the civil justice system, some nongovernmental organizations argue that this is

a sham since so few officers have been convicted or even disciplined. The data, however, does not conceal the real progress made in the attitudes of the armed forces toward human rights in recent years. Thus part of the problem confronting Colombia is public perception, which each side seeks to manipulate in a conflict. Thus far, those opposing the military have been more successful, aided by its flawed human rights record.

There are still reasons for optimism. The Colombian armed forces have generally avoided praetorian ambitions unlike many Latin American militaries. The ministry is organized to enhance civilian decisionmaking authority, including the general orientation on employing forces. In addition, there will be a sizable increase in educated and trained civilian professionals within the Ministry of Defense and the office which controls the national budget.

Colombia faces a complicated civil war in which the performance of both the military and police has sometimes damaged civil-military relations. This has been manifest in human rights violations, dealings with violent paramilitary militias that abuse human rights, and the perception of impunity for offenses committed by the military.